# **Why Reality TV Is the New Family TV**

# Adapted from an article by James Poniewozik, TIME’s TV Critic, May 23, 2013

*The genre that was supposed to be the death of civilized society has become—at least some of it—the best primetime programming for parents to watch with kids.*

Thirteen summers ago, when a pair of shows called Survivor and Big Brother debuted on CBS, there were uneasy cries that reality [TV](http://topics.time.com/tv/) was making our civilization worse. Contestants were encouraged to lie and backstab one another! People were eating actual rats! What awful show was going to be next?

Thirteen years later, you can debate how well reality TV, overall, has fulfilled its promise as a [vehicle for hurting society]. But I do know this: when the regular TV season ended last week and the summer premiere season started, it was an exciting time at home, because it meant **Masterchef** was coming back, and we could watch it together with the Tuned In Jrs.

Reality TV is a big, diverse medium, of course: […,] some of it ugly, some obnoxious, and some of it very, very good. In other words, it’s not unlike scripted TV.

**But another funny thing has happened over the past generation:** reality TV has also become the new version, [...], of primetime family viewing. It’s not just Masterchef: nearly every TV series my wife and I watch with the Tuned In Jrs. is a reality show.

We handicap The Voice contestants’ odds every week. The Amazing Race has given us a whole new perspective on airport travel. Shark Tank captivates the kids, and has shown me—[...]—what a fascinating process valuing a business is. Top Chef, Chopped, Market Warriors—if it involves cooking or selling something, we’ll watch it. Other families I know are into Storage Wars or Duck Dynasty (the latter, I guess, much like families in the ’60s were into The Beverly Hillbillies).

Most of these are competition reality shows, which is no accident: like sports, reality shows like these are a genre of TV that can appeal to kids’ and adult interests without denying either one. Most of these series are made for adults, often without any particular goal of being all-ages entertainment.

But on their own terms, they reflect things kids—at least, the Tuned In Jrs.—are interested in: competition, creation, scorekeeping. They make performance more exciting, or they game-ify aspects of adult life, like cooking or traveling or making money. And though “appropriate” is a relative term, they tend to do it in relatively clean terms. ...

**When people complain that there are fewer good TV shows for families** to watch together, it’s often assumed that means that TV has become more vulgar or adult. Which of course is true in some ways, but really the overall trend is simply that, as TV has become more various and fragmented, it’s become more *specific*. Everyone has their own demo-targeted TV now, children and parents alike. We actually live in a pretty great era for kids’ TV, and I’ve written endlessly here about great shows that could only exist in a time of many cable outlets and greater creative license. But most adults have limited tolerance for shows written for kids, and it will be years before I show the Jrs. more than the opening titles for Game of Thrones. (Which they love.)

And by the way, that’s fine. Like any parent now, I find navigating media with my kids to be a challenge sometimes. But I don’t expect, or want, media to cater to my particular concerns as a parent.

People sometimes assume that, because I’m a TV critic, I’m permissive about what my kids watch. Just the opposite–there are many things I watched as a kid that I would not let my own kids near. Yesterday, when news broke that St[eve Forrest, star of the ’70s drama SWAT, had died](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/swat-star-steve-forrest-dies-534934), I was overcome with nostalgia, for a show that was pretty much a constant barrage of heavy-weapons fire (with a great theme song). What was I doing watching this when I was seven years old?

**I remember enough to know that the good old days were not** always as kid-sanitized as we may want to think. Plenty of the “family” sitcoms from my childhood, however warmly I may remember them, do not exactly hold up well. I’m glad instead that my kids are growing up in a time that has created primetime series like Lost–which they can watch, later, when they’re older.

In the meantime, I’m grateful for reality TV [because it’s something my kids and I can enjoy together].